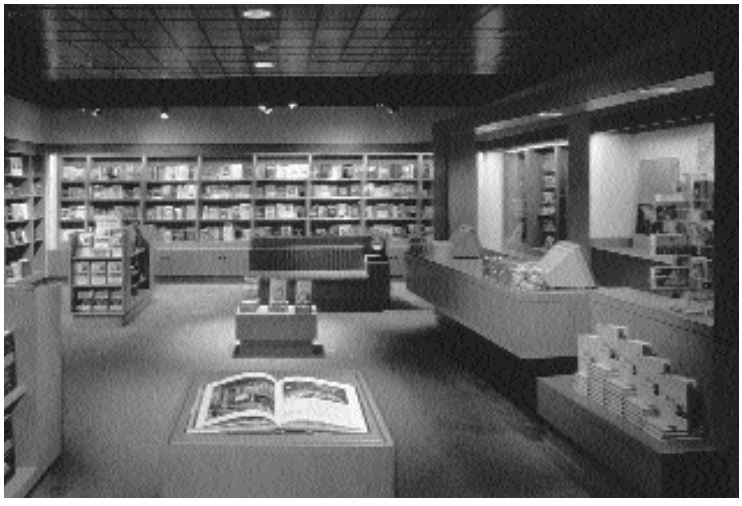
Arch Horst

The Park Bookstore Earns More Than Money

National parks value their resources. The parks' central mission is to preserve and interpret landscapes, buildings, and artifacts. In an effort to underwrite their mission, parks have turned to commerce in the form of bookstores. This potentially awkward embrace of park resources (particularly museum collections) and commerce often produces significant income, in some cases over $500,000 in annual support for an individual park. Desiring to increase their support of park activities, the cooperating associations that run the stores have expanded their selection of interpretive merchandise beyond books. As a result, it is now more accurate to call them park stores, not bookstores.

Fortunately, income is not the only benefit received from a successful retail operation. A well-designed and merchandised store can also extend the impact of a park's museum collections and interpretive themes far beyond its exhibits, programs, and site. And it can be done with a sense of style and retailing savvy that reflects well on the park. We have all seen such stores; we leave them feeling good about what the park and the store had to offer. What are the characteristics of a successful park store, one that creatively resolves the inherent tension between commerce and park collections and themes? Based on ten years of evaluating and designing museum and park stores, my colleague Judy Flam and I believe the characteristics can be distilled to the following four.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Store. Careful merchandise selection and store design produced a store that addresses the visitors' intellectual and physical needs while expressing and extending the museum's specific mission. Photo by Edward Owen, Washington, DC.

Successful stores meet the needs of the customer. Given the importance parks place on their mission, it is natural to think that all decisions affecting a park store should be made from the park's perspective. This point of view, however, overlooks the fact that if the customers' needs and interests are not met, then there will be no transaction.

To ensure that a store serves the park visitors, the successful retailer continuously refines his or her sense of the park's visitors/customers. Where do they come from? What is the age range? Generally, what are their income levels? Why did they come to the park? How long did they stay? What did they do during their visit? What did they like about the visit? Where else have they visited in the immediate area? Answers to these questions will reveal visitor preferences and valuable clues for creating a visitor-focused store. Significantly, answers to these same questions can also help park staff refine the programs and services provided for park visitors.

Understanding the visitors' interests and needs does not require that the park's interests be overwhelmed in a rush "to give the customer what he wants." The mere fact that the visitors have chosen to visit a particular park indicates that there is a significant overlap of the visitors' and park's concerns. For instance, when planning the store for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, we repeatedly asked: "What will the visitors experience?" "Will they be looking for a store?" "What will they want to buy?" The answers to these and other questions led us to establish a merchandise mix that was almost exclusively books—a merchandise mix that met the needs of the visitors and was reflective of the museum's mission, collections, exhibits, and programs.

Addressing the customers' needs and interests requires, in most cases, that more than books

be sold. Visitors have different responses to a park visit and they will choose to "extend" or "concretize" the visit in merchandise to which they are attracted and that they can afford. Stores that limit themselves to merchandise attractive to park staff reduce their sales and the opportunity for some visitors to extend the visit beyond the park's boundaries. Such a result is unfortunate from both a mission and profit perspective.

Understanding the visitors also means that the store needs to change periodically. This is a retail reality that might seem to park personnel (who are committed to preserving the past) as indecisive, lacking commitment. In fact, retailers have learned that if they are to increase sales and better serve their customer they must continually adjust the merchandise mix, relocate merchandise in the store and mark down poor selling or no longer related merchandise. In addition, as the seasons change, so do the visitors; the location of merchandise and the emphasis given to certain merchandise also needs to change if each season's customers, and the park, are to be well served.

Successful stores carefully and creatively relate the merchandise to the settings, collections, and programs of the park. To some, the relation of merchandise to park themes begins and ends with National Park Service Director's Order No. 32: "Cooperating Associations." But successful retailing in a national park is about making interesting, unexpected, inspired, and appropriate connections between customers and park themes; selecting merchandise cannot be so easily codified. How does a successful store manager gain the insight to make those connections? The manager must be thoroughly familiar with the park, perhaps even "visit" with family or friends who have never visited before to experience first hand what visitors see, hear, and respond to. Store managers read park materials and talk to program developers and interpreters to keep abreast of new themes and programs.

With this background, the store manager/buyer can then enter the retail marketplace, looking for merchandise that relates to the park and appeals to the park's particular range of visitors. In parks that are tightly focused on a single momentous event or important individual (the Lincoln Memorial, for instance) the job is relatively easy. More creativity is called for in those parks with more diffuse topics or ones with less historic significance. In those cases, the store personnel are more dependent on cross-merchandising (the grouping of related but different types of merchandise) to expand the visitor's understanding of the subject and to encourage a purchase.

Stores have a duty (rarely, if ever, ignored) not to encourage illegal or questionable practices. Contemporary Native American pots and baskets can be sold if they relate to the collections and themes and only if authentic craftsmanship and materials are used. But the store must also take the opportunity to clearly explain the heritage preservation issues and why the items being sold are consistent with exemplary heritage preservation practices.

Naturally, "relatedness" alone is not a sufficient criterion for adding a product to the merchandise mix. The quality of an item is equally important. National parks are committed to pursuing their mission with the highest standards, and therefore the store should only present merchandise that is designed, manufactured, and packaged to similar standards. The store has an obligation to reinforce that benefit.

For the many park retailers committed to serving their parks with well-related and high-quality merchandise, the national park's ambivalence about certain merchandise—in some parks, for example, T-shirts, jewelry, or film—is unfortunate. Visitors ask for these items and are clearly disappointed when they are referred somewhere else; this represents a failure to serve the visitor. Equally important, not having **well-designed** T-shirts and jewelry or film also fails to serve the park, as they represent opportunities for the visitors to take their experience home with them and share it with others.

Successful stores are designed to maximize their retail potential. This is often a challenge. Space, for one, can be at a premium within a visitor center, and achieving the optimum size can be difficult. The optimum size is dependent on the number of merchandise items for sale, the number of visitors, and the fluctuations in visitor traffic. A store that is too large can have as negative an impact on sales as a store that is too small. In the first instance, the merchandise is so spread out and repetitive that the store looks empty, or equally undesirable, the cost of carrying sufficient inventory to make the store look full unreasonably increases operating costs. We have adjusted the size of stores up and down to better serve the customers and better present the merchandise. Most recently, at the Sugarlands Visitor Center in

Great Smoky Mountains National Park Sugarlands Visitor Center Store. Building a store that could accommodate the large number of visitors has resulted in a greater than 50% increase in sales. Photo by the author.

the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we designed a new store that was four times larger than the previous store. In this case, the goal was to better accommodate the surges of visitors in the peak seasons and the pulses of visitors arriving on tour buses. The store's management had observed that sales dipped precipitously in those situations and reasoned that a larger store was the answer. Its retailing instincts were confirmed; the larger store has seen a 50% increase in sales.

Also challenging are the design and construction budgets available for renovating an existing store or for building a new store. Because every dollar spent on park store improvements is a dollar that is no longer available for supporting park programs, the cooperating associations that run the stores are naturally uncomfortable appearing to invest too much in store improvements. Unfortunately, nothing depresses sales, and consequently the long-term support of park operations, more than a store that appears cobbled together or generic. Successful designs are those that reflect and support the stature of the park. In some instances this mandates a more extensive investment, in others only careful planning and fixture selection is required, or can be justified. Store improvements should be seen as an investment in a future income stream, not as an expense.

Where a store or stores are located in a national park often presents a challenge. The well-established rule of thumb is that the store should be at the point where visitors enter and leave the park. But there are often multiple points of entry and exit making it difficult to reach all of the visitors. Signage within the park that identifies store location(s) can help. While this may seem overtly commercial, directing visitors to stores and their interpretive merchandise has important interpretive value for those visitors who will not have the benefit of a park program or contact with a park ranger.

A well understood tenet of successful retailing is that the longer you hold a customer in a store the more likely you are to make a sale or to make a higher sale. Niketown and Disney stores, for example, rely on video technology and animated figures to attract and hold customers. While these strategies are not appropriate for stores in a national park, the strategic inclusion of exhibits, graphics, and other interpretive material can serve the same purpose, stimulating visitors and giving the store more time to capture the visitors' attention with merchandise. In the new store we are currently designing at Grand Canyon National Park, the cooperating association is devoting one quarter of the store to interpretive exhibits that will supplement Park Service material in the park's new Canyon View Information Plaza. These exhibits will hold the visitor in the store and will provide the opportunity to directly relate merchandise to park themes. In some parks, the view from the store, especially if it is artfully framed, can have a similar benefit.

Finally, stores need to be designed with the visitors' shopping styles in mind. For some visitors, and in some parks, this means providing a place for visitors to rest. It almost always means organizing the store so that visitors can easily find the merchandise that interests them. It means locating the books in the quietest section of the store so book customers have the chance to fully consider their purchases; while this might appear to be de-emphasizing the books, it actually increases book sales. Conversely, it often means placing more impulse items—cards, mementos—at the front of the store, so visitors with very little time to shop can still make a purchase that will extend their visit.

Successful stores are operated to provide a positive experience for the visitor. A national park meets the visitor more than halfway; helpful rangers, visitor programs, informative literature, and interpretive signage all contribute to a memorable and meaningful experience. Successful stores strive to extend that level of service and accommodation into the store itself. Store design, as discussed above, is an important feature of service, as is having the merchandise that appeals to visitors, but equally important is training staff who go beyond being merely courteous and proficient. The store staff can help fulfill the store's (and park's) mission by assisting customers to appreciate the connection between the park's collections and themes and the merchandise. The store is often the last stop in the park and therefore the last opportunity to reinforce the park's message. Indeed, providing helpful insights about park collections and themes is doubly important for those visitors who, regrettably, never get beyond the store or visitor center.

These four characteristics of a successful store can be summarized in a single sentence. **A successful park store is site-specific**. Nothing undermines the potential of a park store more quickly than unresponsiveness to the interests and needs of visitors, unrelated or low quality merchandise, a generic appearance, or poor customer service.

Stores fulfill their retail and interpretive mission when they commit to interpreting the park's museum collections and themes. When they are given the freedom to do so in broad and innovative ways, they not only serve their financial mission but also enhance their interpretive function and expand the impact of the park far beyond its boundaries. It is a creative endeavor and takes the active participation and sympathetic support of the interpreters, park administrators, and those responsible for the collections.

Arch Horst is a partner with Judy Flam in MarketPlace Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts, consultants to parks and museums nationwide on management, financial, product development, and merchandise issues. He is also a principal in Black River Architects, a firm specializing in museum retail, food service, and visitor services projects.

Jane Sledge

Surf's Up—
Do You Know Where Your Wet Suit Is?

Recently I noticed my son, John Jensen, age 7, wearing his personal floatation device, an object known to many as a life jacket, as he used our home computer. I didn't ask why, but I wondered if he were worried about falling overboard into the vast ocean of information. I haven't seen many museum staff sporting life jackets or wetsuits lately, but I know that they are concerned with the vastness of the information space and its challenge to museums to provide authentic, interesting, and reliable voyages. This is not a new concern. In 1968, Everett Ellin wrote, "As the museum audience everywhere continues to grow at an alarming rate, we are coming to recognize that the textual and visual data descriptive of our public collections (of art, scientific, and historical material) must be made more accessible and employed in far more imaginative ways than are possible by conventional means."[1] The trouble is, we are still searching for answers.

Museums are faced with many hurdles in using the Web creatively: existing processes and procedures are hard to change; technically knowledgeable staff are scarce and expensive; revenue generation from online products has yet to provide significant returns; virtual audiences are mysterious; digitization and content creation are expensive; and copyright issues are ubiquitous. We face more challenges in 2000 than Ellin in 1968 ever considered possible.

Process

Robert Janes writes, "…there is abundant evidence to indicate that organizational change and adaptation occur with great difficulty in museums."[2] Shifting staff priorities to work in a digital environment, to produce, mark-up, and